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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MADRID 003846

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: SPAIN CELEBRATES ARREST OF ETA LEADERS

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathy Fitzpatrick; reason 1.5 (D).

11. (C) Summary. Spanish politicians, police officials, and the media rejoiced after learning of the capture of ETA leader Mikel Albizu Iriarte, his partner Soledad Iparragirre, and 19 other ETA members and supporters in southern France and northern Spain. Police also seized hundreds of pounds of explosives, detonators, tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition, and dozens of automatic weapons. Albizu (AKA "Antza") served as the head of ETA's political apparatus since the 1992 arrest of ETA's political cupula. Iparragirre (AKA "Anboto"), who spent at least several months in "retirement" in Cuba in recent years, is wanted in connection with at least 14 killings in Spain. GOS officials and opposition parties lauded the success of the four-year effort by the Guardia Civil, as well as the cooperation and efficiency of the French police in rounding up the suspects. The GOS will seek the extradition of Iparragirre on murder charges, but is evidently content to let Albizu be tried in France, despite calls from some in Spain to demand his extradition as well. There is a palpable sense that, after decades of painstaking policework, the GOS may be near to eliminating ETA's terrorist threat. Nevertheless, the GOS has struck an appropriately cautionary tone since dangerous ETA militants remain at large and will be tempted to stage retaliatory strikes against the GOS. End Summary.

//A "HISTORIC" BLOW TO ETA//

12. (U) Interior Minister Jose Antonio Alonso announced on 10/3 that French and Spanish police had scored a "historic" blow against ETA after a four-year Guardia Civil investigation culminated in the rounding up 20 suspects in southern France and 1 in the northern Spanish city of Burgos. The detainees include Albizu, ETA's leader for at least the last 11 years, and his partner Iparragirre, one of ETA's most notorious killers. Iparragirre was believed to be in charge of collecting "revolutionary taxes" through the extortion of businessmen in the Basque Region and is implicated in at least 14 killings. The arrest of the couple was described as an unexpected bonus for the police, since they only rarely occupied the French farmhouse where they were arrested. Also present at the farmhouse was their small child, who was born in Cuba when Iparragirre "retired" there for several months or years in the late 1990s. The only arrest in Spain was that of Pedro Alcantarilla Mozota, a truck driver accused of organizing recent bomb attacks on high-tension power lines in the Basque Region.

13. (U) Spanish political observers described the arrests as the most damaging to ETA since the 1992 detentions of ETA's three political, military, and logistical leaders in Bidart, France. The 10/3 arrests are the most significant in a series of arrests and investigations over the last two years that appear to have seriously disrupted ETA's capacity to carry out terrorist attacks. They come just two weeks after ETA released a video reaffirming the primacy of the armed struggle in ETA's ideology and the group's intention to continue carrying out attacks. Interior Minister Alonso declared that ETA has been "debilitated" and has "no political future."

//OPPOSITION HAILS ARRESTS//

14. (SBU) The arrests came as the now-in-opposition Popular Party (PP) was wrapping up its 15th Party Congress, an event dominated by discussion of how the March 11 terrorist attacks on Spanish commuter trains had been the decisive factor in the Socialist (PSOE) victory over the PP. Even as the PP leaders defended their record and attacked the PSOE's "opportunism" in using the train bombings to tilt the vote against the PP, speaker after speaker congratulated the GOS on the 10/3 arrests. Newly-installed PP President Mariano Rajoy reaffirmed the value of the PP's pact with the PSOE to present a united front against terrorism. All political parties also praised the GOS and the Guardia Civil. Meanwhile, the ETA front group Batasuna, which the USG and Spain have declared a terrorist group, remained silent on the police operation.

15. (C) The only discordant note concerns the GOS's apparent decision not to seek the extradition of Albizu, who would face terrorism charges but not murder charges in Spain because he has not been directly implicated in ETA attacks. PP leader Rajoy insisted that the GOS seek the extradition of

Albizu anyway, claiming he is ultimately responsible for the 119 killings attributed to ETA under Albizu's leadership. High-profile judge (and sometime loose cannon) Baltazar Garzon has also indicated his interest in interviewing Albizu, and perhaps ultimately in his extradition.

//POLITICAL RIPPLES IN BASQUE REGION//

16. (C) The apparent "decapitation" of ETA may affect the political dynamic in the Basque Region in the runup to an important December vote in the Basque Parliament and regional elections in May 2005. The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), the most important Basque nationalist grouping and a long-standing opponent of ETA, is heading towards a showdown with the GOS over its desire to hold a referendum on self-determination in the Basque territory ("Plan Ibarretxe"). The PNV plan comes to a vote in the Basque Parliament in December, at which point it may be defeated by PP and PSOE representatives. If the plan is defeated in the Basque Parliament, the PNV will use Plan Ibarretxe as its party platform in the May elections, which would likely lead to a PNV victory. The PNV has sworn not to proceed with any referendum in a climate of ETA violence. The 10/3 arrests reduce ETA's capability to wage such a campaign and, paradoxically, increase the likelihood of a subsequent political confrontation between the Basque government and the central government.

//COMMENT//

17. (C) The arrest of Albizu and the other ETA members represents the greatest blow to ETA in 12 years and a major setback in its ability to threaten the GOS with terrorist violence. However, GOS officials are wise to caution against overly optimistic assessments of the impact of the police sweep. Even before the 10/3 arrests, ETA was in crisis due to earlier GOS police successes and the capture of key ETA documents by police in recent months. Despite its weakness, ETA managed to carry out a small, but very public, bombing campaign in Spanish tourist centers throughout the summer of 2004. In addition, police have yet to corral other important ETA militants, such as Josu Ternero, a particularly violent ETA member who was spotted with Albizu in the months prior to the 10/3 arrests. There is a high likelihood that ETA remnants will seek to prove their continued viability as a terror organization, so dangerous ETA attacks remain a possibility, even if the 10/3 attacks truly mark the beginning of the end of the ETA threat.

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